

A vicious circle

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

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Sonic the Hedgehog. There, now we've got that out of the way we can move on. Although never planned as such, Kid Chaos was to be Magnetic Fields' swansong, released shortly after Commodore's bubble burst in August 1994.

Programmer, Shaun Southern, and artist, Andrew Morris (the miraculous double act who brought us the Lotus and Super Cars series), set out to create the ultimate platform game for the Amiga, one to finally rival those hailed as the pinnacle of the genre for the consoles. They managed to pull plenty of white rabbits out of the hat for this one, literally in some cases, but did the furry critters bring the dream team gaming plaudits and riches beyond their wildest fantasies, or eat all the carrots and do a bunk to Toontown?



Given what an ambitious undertaking the veteran developers were to embark upon, it's no wonder things didn't exactly run according to plan, as Andrew revealed in an interview conducted with Amiga PD in June 2011. I really should have kept you dangling a bit longer, shouldn't I?

"It was such a huge game that it took 2 years to complete - the same as all three Lotus games put together. Gremlin thought it was too similar to Zool, so we spoke to other publishers and Ocean offered the best deal. I remember when they first saw it, a huge crowd gathered around. Someone said, "it's the best thing I've seen on the CD32, but what is the Amiga version like?". I replied, "this *is* the Amiga version"."



Kid - the time travelling caveboy mascot of the title - over the course of his protracted development underwent a number of changes to his personality, name and even species. In one Amiga magazine preview the author assumed 'Kit Vicious' - the starring protagonist - to be a fox. One destined to be culled when it transpired that Sonic's sidekick, Tails, had beaten Magnetic Fields to the punch. As it turns out the lead character was actually intended to be an ickle cutesy blue baby cat; the clue was in the title, as Andrew went on to explain in his interview with Amiga PD...

"The game was originally to be released as Kid Vicious. There had been a lot of fuss in the newspapers about games being too violent, so the name was changed to Kid Chaos. The flowers were always flowers - that was the first level I designed. The character was also

changed - I can't remember why - from a cat: Cosmic Kitten (also the original working title)."



That reminds me, I've got something a bit special to unveil. It's on its way right now via airmail. That's a pre-emptive Phil Collins joke. Don't worry, the penny will drop later and it'll be hilarious. Anyway, Andrew has sent me an exclusive, previously unseen scan of his Cosmic Kitten design to share with you all. Obviously the only way I can do justice to its introduction is by way of a drumming gorilla. Take it away Kong!

Amidst the metamorphosis and confusion, when Amiga Power reviewed the game in September 1994 (apportioning a 71% grade) one of the abandoned titles - Kid Vicious - made it

onto the front cover of the magazine. This oversight was pointed out in the article itself where the final name *was* printed correctly. Some journalists likened Kid to Kirk Brandon, others to Billy Idol. Our own Amigos see him as more like a typical slack-jawed high school jock/bully. The stereotypical captain of the average American football team maybe. I think they make a good point. Either way, he's not overly endearing, especially to fans of fluffy anthropomorphic creatures. Perhaps that was the goal, to set him apart and appeal to a different crowd.

And on that note, most of the critics certainly recognised his potential. The One's assessment culminated in an 87% bottom line, as did that of CU Amiga. Amiga Format conferred a still well above average 79% score, whilst Amiga Action accorded Kid a time-travellingly respectable 88. Not miles per hour, unfortunately. They definitely missed a trick there.

Elsewhere it was reported that the elaborate, technologically cutting-edge project was initiated in August 1991, which would have made it a three-year marathon rather than the two Andrew alluded to more recently, and Shaun has also confirmed in interviews.

In the one he conducted with Mamemeister for YouTube in October 2017 for instance...

"That was one of these games that took two years to write and didn't do amazingly well. It got fairly good reviews. It was supposed to be like Sonic wasn't it?, and if you saw the original character it was *exact/y* like Sonic. It was Cosmic Kitten, he had a spiky hairdo. It was very similar. We probably spent far too long copying other people's ideas and just changing them slightly. It was using all the effects the Amiga could do to try and get more out of it."

Whoever we are, or were, spiritually, physically or whatever, we've been kidnapped by a couple of mad scientists and teleported from our prehistoric era existence into the future. *Our* present, in 1994 that is.

To appear less conspicuous, I suppose, we've been kitted out in gear borrowed from the Grease set. It's not clear - beyond experimenting for the sake of experimenting - what the purpose of any of this is. Nick Clarkson, Ocean's PR guy, appears to have tacked on the back-story as an afterthought, presuming the gameplay would speak for itself.

Regardless, we're not happy about our predicament and so intend to return to the stone age post-haste. It dawns on our early man avatar that he's being held captive by the scientist's force field, kept active by power pods concealed in the scenery. In flowers, street lights and Sonic TVs for instance. This explains why you must smash a designated number of them in order to progress to the next stage, and ultimately root out the time machine in which you arrived.



Lost in translation, other critics explained the scenario slightly differently, rationalising that the reason we're smashing flowers etc. is to release the energy required to power the time machine and escape to the past. I'm guessing it will then be a past unreachable by the same loopy scientists because Kid will be in possession of (hopefully) the *only* time machine, and when we eventually make the transition to the scientist's era it will have long since eroded to dust. Oh wait, what about evolution, learning from the technology and so on? You see, this is precisely why you shouldn't touch time travel plots with a barge pole. The BTTF nit-pickers would have a field day with this one. Before my head starts to hurt we'll move on.

Whatever we hope to achieve by smashing the environment to smithereens, we go about it by whacking anything that moves (or doesn't) with our club. Cleverly this attack was

rolled (literally) into our jump mechanism, activated using the fire button. With every leap, Kid spins into a ball with his bat protruding to decimate anything in its path. This allowed coder, Shaun, to eschew the much-maligned 'up for jump' system, whilst also engaging the same fire button to trigger an attack. The result is a control system that takes ten seconds to explain and just as long to get to grips with... unless you accidentally collect the power-*down* that reverses your joystick commands. I wouldn't recommend that. Shaun and Andrew wisely sidestepped any irritating slippery, slidey ice levels, yet this made the cut, unfortunately.

Intuitive as they are, the controls aren't nearly as fluid as we'd like. Kid is heavy, *maaan*; slow off the starting blocks due to the inertia in effect, and tough to bring to a halt again thanks to his heavy momentum. It stands to reason I suppose if we're to believe Kid is the sluggish, knuckle-dragging Neanderthal portrayed on the box cover whose only words are 'ugh?'.

Until he's in full, slingshot-bouncing swing that is. Then he's a speed demon, rampaging through pipes and around loops and slopes as rapidly as the blue, spiky one I promised I wasn't going to mention again. Running smoothly at breakneck pace is Kid's USP. He refuses to be hampered by environmental obstacles, not even walls, which our hero spins through like a human cyclone.



By 1994 Shaun knew how to milk every last drop of performance out of the Amiga, clicking his fingers to make it pull off feats tantamount to magic to non-programmers like myself. Possibly never seen before in a home computer game at the time, implemented in Kid Chaos are some exceptionally convincing light sourcing effects that give the impression we're stepping into and out of the shadows. As we move into a pipe, for instance, the sun is blocked out and our colour palette takes a dip towards the crepuscular end of the spectrum. Emerging from the gloom, our brighter hues are restored as we're once again spotlighted as the star of the show.



Elsewhere minor elements of the scenery are individually animated just for the hell of it. If you appreciate attention to detail, you'll be like a pig in... a platformer. There are *lots* of those about in the background and they don't move in this case, or serve any purpose other than looking menacing and demonstrating what a talented artist Andrew is, which is fine by me. The same can be said of some of the bricks that rotate in isolation within certain walls. Beautifully pointless! That would have looked perfect in a tech demo sequence.

More exciting still is the multi-layered, stunning parallax scrolling that injects such depth into the proceedings it's easy to suspend your disbelief in flat, 2D gaming. Not only do the stratum slide by at different speeds, they're actually animated. The best example in Kid Chaos would be the continually pumping pistons in the toy factory level. We can be blasé about it today, of course, it's 24 years later!

Mulling over Kid Chaos' visual delights in his YouTube interview with Mamemeister, Shaun explains...

"He had about three layers of parallax scrolling and that really *was* playing - for want of a better word, silly buggers - with the things in the background, changing all the colours on every few lines so you could have red flowers up here and green flowers down here. A lot of it was down to the artist."

Andrew covered the same ground - only in more detail - in his appearance on the Retro Hour in March 2018 (it's episode number 115 in case you want to look it up).

"The backdrops were technically in three colours and a backdrop colour and we changed the colours on every raster line, and gave the illusion that they were very big multi-coloured backdrops. I think some of them were in over a hundred colours and I had to draw them in sections in bands and there was never more than three colours on one line.

It was so difficult to design that Shaun wrote a special programme for me that found random colours. So I would draw the mountains in one picture that would somehow connect to the second picture that had a field or something in it, and each section would be in maybe 32 colours. But there couldn't be more than three colours on one line and occasionally I would accidentally add another colour or two colours and Shaun did a programme that would say which line the extra pixel was, and I'd have to find the pixel and remove it because you could only have three colours in the background. That was the limit of the technology. It did give the illusion of these very, very colourful, rich environments."

Audio trickery hasn't been neglected either. Plunge into the water and you're immediately enveloped in muffled permutations of the standard sound effects, as you'd expect in the real world. Step back onto terra firma and the clarity is reinstated. If you're familiar with the Lotus and Super Cars series you may also spot that some of the sound effects have been recycled. A kind of auditory Easter egg if you like.

Music (credited to 'Pipe Smoker's Cough') and effects (courtesy of Shaun and Peter Liggett) can be enabled or disabled independently at will; a welcome bonus considering the soundtrack is all of the excessively frenetic rave variety and so begins to grate on the nerves exceedingly quickly... unless you pop some psychotropic pills first and it all begins to make sense, so I've heard.

Spread across four disks and five worlds, each split into four levels, it's a colossal game comprising ruined cities, a secret garden, techno fortress, toxic wastelands, a toy factory and underwater areas where time plus a lack of oxygen determines your precarious lifespan.

Each level encompasses 200 screens and took two weeks to design, which explains why Kid Chaos only surfaced several months after the Amiga was declared dead in the water. Accordingly, sales were negligible, in no way assisted by the pirates who made available a cracked version from day two. By all accounts, it was a heartbreaking conclusion to two long years of hard slog and anticipation. Andrew spelt out the impact it had on him personally - *financially* anyway - in a video interview conducted by Daniel Waddington for the Lemon Amiga YouTube channel, published on 23rd May 2014...

"Kid Chaos was the last game Shaun and I designed and that took two years with just the two of us working on it, and we got a small forward on it when it was released.

We never saw any money from it. The day after it was released it was pirated so no-one bought it and the Amiga was kind of ("on its last legs?" Dan suggests) yeah, it was at that time."

Andrew opened up further with regards to the same subject in conversation with Dan Wood and Ravi Abbott for their Retro Hour podcast. In an emotional, engaging exchange he leaves us in no doubt that a great deal more than time and money are invested such projects...

"It was a labour of love. I remember long long days and evenings designing it. It was a huge game that took four disks, which was massive. I think the most we'd done before that was two disks for Lotus III and this was four disks of work. It was two years of working evenings on something that was really well crafted. We put a huge amount of effort into it and it just did nothing financially. It was just a huge flop."

Because they felt clichéd by this stage, rather than end-of-level guardians, we tackle bonus games revolving around classic arcade titles such as Space Invaders, Asteroids, Breakout, and Duck Shoot. Ironically, in the latter, you shoot the teddies and avoid the ducks. In fact they *all* have a novel twist of some sort.

As detailed in my 2016 Q&A with Shaun, hidden mini-games of a similar nature had become a celebrated fixture in Magnetic Fields' games by this juncture so these were a fitting extension and salutation to their back catalogue. Their aim was to reward gamers with unexpected 'frosting' if you like, whilst re-using existing source material meant the time required to implement it would be trivial. It also didn't hurt that divulging to the press the procedure to access them meant the games in question would continue to be name-

dropped in the magazines and discussed in the playground. Essentially it was the route to free advertising.

Beat the bonus games and you're awarded a password, allowing you to continue where you left off without having to replay all the levels you've completed previously. This, the inclusion of restart points and the game's capacity to reload immediately after you die, all add to the sense of continually making progress (as long as you don't respawn on top of an enemy that is). Consequently, you're buoyed along to keep plugging away until you finish the game without becoming unnecessarily frustrated.



Two factors hobbling your ability to achieve this are limited energy and time. Your energy naturally rejuvenates simply by way of your continued existence (providing you're not underwater gasping for breath!). Though stand still on land in the hope of regaining it, and you tempt the risk of running out of time. This balancing act certainly adds nuance to the proceedings, never permitting you to put your feet up to coast your way to the end. Alternatively, you can collect apples for a quick energy boost without first applying the brakes.

A CD32 iteration of Kid Chaos was also released to coincide with the standard edition, though as it was already pushing the boundaries of what we believed could be achieved on the Amiga, very little was added by way of enhancements. More colours, smoother scrolling and some speech were all you were missing out on if you didn't own an AGA Amiga.

For reasons that escape me, lots of people actually *like* the spiny blue mammal game that shan't be named. Immediately dismissed as a clone, despite enjoying a generally positive reception, Kid Chaos' core audience didn't exactly stampede through the aisles of John Menzies to embrace him. I imagine this was in large part thanks to them already having jumped overboard Commodore's sinking ship, and not even being aware of its existence.

In isolation, news of Kid's ability to walk up the same hills that perplex SEGA's mascot sadly wasn't enough to swing it. It certainly didn't help matters that anyone sufficiently invested in the platforming pinball concept and still clinging to an Amiga-shaped life raft didn't have long to wait to get their mitts on a *free* copy courtesy of their friendly neighbourhood Pirateman.

Had the milk-guzzling, nocturnal, garden pet (I don't know either why I can't just say 'hedgehog', as is traditional when

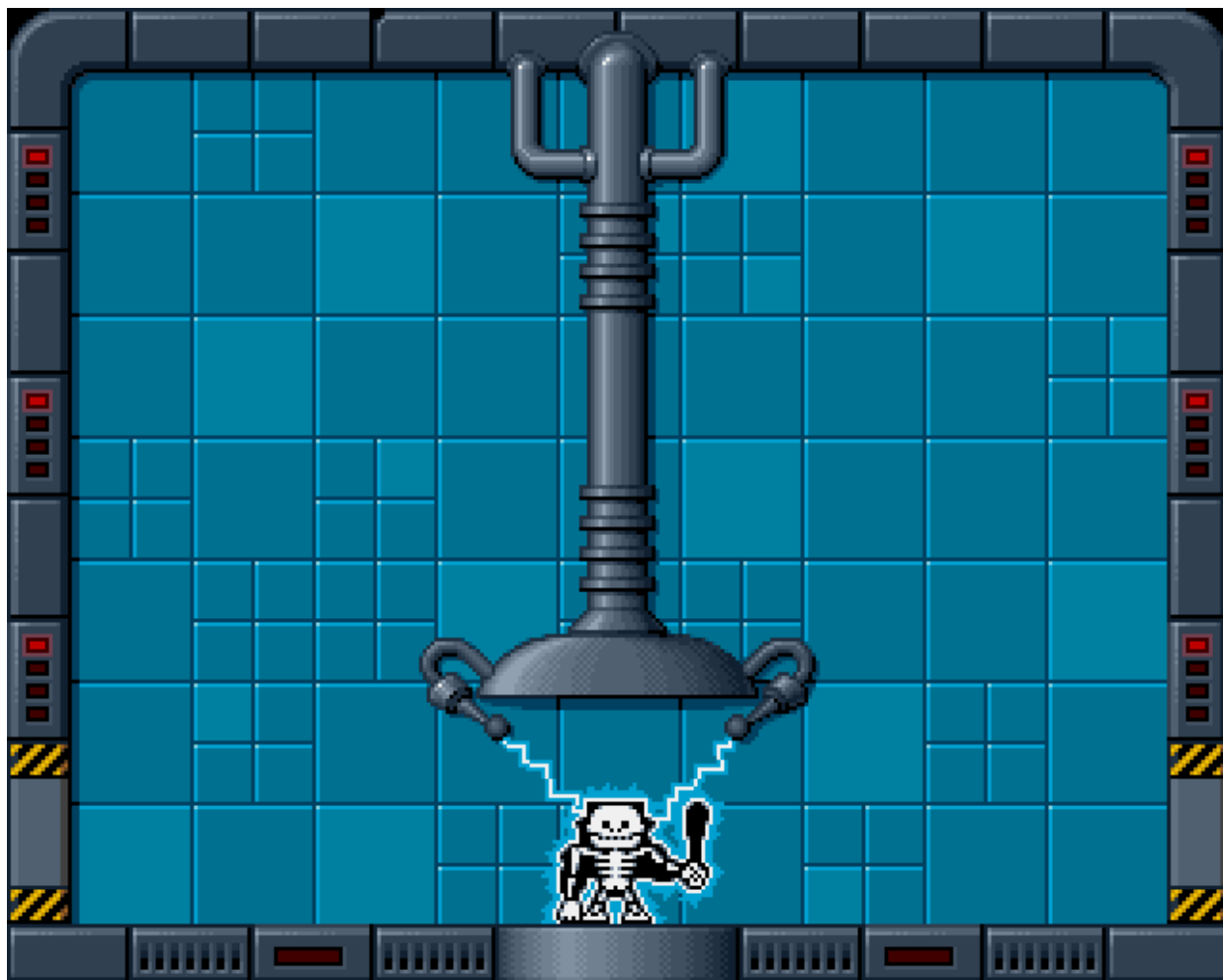
you're referring to a hedgehog) not emerged two months prior to the commencement of Kid Chaos' development, and been available for consoles as well as DOS systems, it may well have faired much better. I'm in no doubt it outperforms anything that had gone before on the Amiga in terms of speed-freakery and technical wizardry, and even rivals its console counterparts.

That said, Kid's major flaw for much of his target audience is that he's simply not a sufficiently appealing character. It would be quite a stretch to imagine him adorning the box of a gleaming new A1200 as a potential mascot in the same way that Zool did for instance. If you can look beyond his plagiaristic origins and uncanny alien ant impersonation, Zool is quirky, cool and intriguing. Conversely, Kid is a prehistoric, trudging dimwit. Shoehorned into an already gridlocked ark of starring heroes, engendering an affinity for the lead is critical to a game's success.



Ultimately, blazing velocity, despite being Kid Chaos' *raison d'être*, for me is its downfall. Whilst technically radiant, racing through levels at Mach 1 speed, yet having to stop and smash every trinket en route is a recipe for frustration. Of course, it doesn't help that my feeble hand-eye coordination skills haven't got a hope in hell of matching Kid's supersonic pace, and there are no telescopic, robotic fish in sight. Not even a fez or scurrying, bodiless hand. You know, I think that was by design.

Screaming by like a banshee with a firework up its tush, applying the brakes in time to take evasive action simply isn't in my repertoire. To make any progress at all would demand memorisation of each level's layout, rote-learning from my mistakes and endless repetition. And even *then* I'd die of old age before decimating my first floral arrangement.



Kid *does* manage to pull off the Huey Lewis and the News trick in the end, should you be wondering. Locating the time machine, our chum somehow figures out how to launch it, and on the other side of a short transition, we see him standing aloft his Flintstone abode, greeted by a welcome party comprising no-one. How depressingly apt.

THE END

